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SUPERVISORS ASK THE STATE TO STIFFEN PENALTIES FOR PREDATORS SOLICITING SEX FROM CHILDREN

As part of an ongoing effort against sex trafficking of children, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Tuesday called on state legislators to dramatically stiffen penalties for adults convicted of soliciting and having sex with children. Acting on a motion sponsored by Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Don Knabe, the board asked the state to substantially raise fines so that California becomes the most expensive state in the nation in which to be convicted of soliciting sex from children. The same motion also calls for improved services and treatment for the victims.

Several speakers addressed the board about the ongoing problem of child sex trafficking and the challenges of cracking down on so-called “Johns,” including District Attorney Jackie Lacey, Long Beach Police Chief Jim McDonnell, Compton Mayor Aja Brown, the head of the LA County Probation Department’s sex trafficking unit Michelle Guymon as well as a survivor, Jessica Midkiff. Midkiff said she was groomed for work on the streets at age 11 and escaped shortly before turning 21.

“This motion represents a change in our view as to who are the true victims of these crimes and who are the true criminals,” said Lacey. “This motion addresses the market. That “John” who is out there trolling for a child should be treated more harshly by the system. If you are out there specifically looking for sex with a child you should not be treated as if you’re out there looking for sex with an adult.”

Chairman Ridley-Thomas announced that California State Senator Darrell Steinberg, Assemblywoman Holly Mitchell and Assemblyman Ted Lieu have indicated their support for a state bill addressing the demand side of child sex trafficking. In addition, in accordance with a request from the Los Angeles District Attorney, the motion asks that the law be amended so that not knowing a victim's age cannot be used as a legal defense.

"When adults engage in sexual acts with children it should be called what it is: statutory rape," said Supervisor Ridley-Thomas. "These are children, and children cannot consent. There have been strong efforts to appropriately punish sex traffickers, and there are efforts afoot to provide more services and treatment to the victims – mostly girls. But what's missing from this equation are efforts to halt the demand for these children and meaningful consequences for their predators; that's what we're doing today."

Supervisor Knabe said: "We have a good opportunity now, as the new legislative season in Sacramento is gearing up, to continue to promote awareness of this horrific crime and develop effective legislation to help the victims and go after the scumbags who purchase and sell girls for sex," he said. "We must address the "demand" side of this crime and make the penalties severe enough so that these "Johns" don't continue to be nameless and free of any criminal record, while the girls are criminalized. No 12-year-old little girl is choosing this life and we must do everything we can to protect them."

Every day, children – primarily girls – as young as 10 years-old are being coerced and sold into prostitution in Los Angeles County and in counties throughout the state. According to experts in the field, the average life expectancy of these children once they enter the sex trade is seven years, due to the ravages of HIV/AIDS and the violence to which they are regularly subjected. At the low end, a victim could make \$3,500 a week while some victims earn as much as \$1,000 a day, making child sex trafficking a highly lucrative business increasingly run by gangs.

"Like narcotics, we're seeing the proliferation of sex trafficking being put forth by the gangs. We're seeing girls as young as nine or 10," said McDonnell. "The pimps set the minimum for them to make, they stay out there until they do or they're beaten."

The men who solicit sex from children, however, often are not arrested and prosecuted, and even when they are, typically face only a proverbial slap on the wrist. The motion, asks lawmakers to amend the state penal code to make soliciting sex with a minor a felony. It also requires the "customers" to register as sex offenders and increases the

fine from \$1,000 to \$10,000. It calls on law enforcement to refocus its priorities and actively arrest and prosecute these predators.

“The buyers of sex can be anyone,” said Guymon. “They are professionals, tourists, the diversity of buyers allows them to blend into our communities. The majority are men, usually they are married, hold a good job and have an average to high IQ.” Evidence suggests that predators are seeking to have sex with younger girls who are perceived to be both healthier and more vulnerable.

Helping the survivors and changing the perception of young girls who are trafficked is essential, said Midkiff.

“For every teenage girl there were 20 adult customers per night who were purchasing her. This equals up to 140 customers per week for one single girl,” she said. “As long as sex buyers are prowling the streets and lurking in the internet demanding sex without any perceived consequences, we will not curtail this problem.”

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